

AESTHETIC FIELDS



*A collection of asemic writing and abstract landscapes
by Todd Burst
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ASEMIC

Asemic writing are text without meaning. They are non meaningful in the literal sense, instead they play on the aesthetics of written languages. Often considered a form of concrete poetry, asemic glyphs mimic words, phrases, alphabets, but unlike traditional writing they do not convey meaning in the traditional sense of meaning. They play with the conventions of writing.

Meaning, of course, is conventional and socially constructed. Asemic text transcends 20th century philosophy of language by removing meaning altogether. These text are aesthetic through and through.

Michael Jacobson, in an interview with asymptote journal, recently described asemic writing as “a wordless, open semantic form of writing that is international in its mission.”[1] What is wordless writing? Asemic (non-semantic) writing has components of visual literature (text), without meaning—so-to-speak. He goes on to describe it as a “shadow, impression, and abstraction of conventional writing.” The term ‘shadow’ best describes asemic writing. The content of many asemic pieces have the appearance of words; in some works, the words are portrayed as if they have syntax. They are the ‘shadows’ of language when the ‘stuff’ called meaning has dropped away. Seen in the historical context of philosophy, theory and globalizations, asemic writing is a deeply provocative art movement that deserves more attention from philosophy, literary theory, and global studies.

In 1997, poets Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich started describing their poetry as asemic. Since the 1990s, asemic writing has grown into a global art form. Today, asemic writing can be found in museums and online blogs, magazines, and other venues. Although Gaze and Leftwich were the first to apply the term asemic to their poetry, ‘asemic’ texts have a long history preceding the 1990s. Although the origins of ‘asemic’ text are unknown, according to Jacobson examples can be found as early as the Tang Dynasty, in modern-day China. Early samples of asemic writing occurred in elaborate forms of calligraphy, such as some of the works by Zhang Xu. In the twentieth century, he goes on to explain, “many artists and writers [created] unreadable wordless writing.” The Godfather of asemic writing, Jacobson argues, was Henri Michaux—most notably Michaux’s *Narration* (1927). Other twentieth century asemic writers include: “Brion Gysin, Morita Shiryu and Cy Twombly.”[2]

Asemic writing can be seen as the inevitable outcome of radically translated and deconstructed text. If meaning is detracted from the text, letters and words are set adrift and no longer serve as symbols—therefore, asemic writing is the literature of (non) sens. These fragmented texts serve as a reservoir for aseimc writers to reinterpret language as fluid glyphs unencumbered by the search for absolute meaning, which has plagued philosophy in the beginning of the 20th century. Asemic text help remind us that postmodernism did not tear the world asunder, but instead freed us from the dogmas of absolutism.

NON(SENSE): A HISTORY

Asemic writing reflects the status of texts after twentieth century philosophy and literary theory. Philosophers from both the Analytic and Continental schools agreed that the relationship between text and meaning was indeterminate. Analytic philosophers, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Wilfrid Sellars, and W.V.O Quine believed meaning was contingent upon non-linguistic behavior—Wittgenstein referred to this ambiguous background as ‘forms of life,’ which means, roughly, shared assumptions about experiences.[3] On the Continent, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes read from a different cannon of works they thought were quintessential to understanding philosophy. Derrida and Barthes took their cue from phenomenologists, such as Edmund Husserl, and the works of early twentieth century linguist Saussure and structuralism.[4] Derrida and post-structuralists viewed meaning as emerging through the relation of text, but meaning is put-off temporally, nor can it be found in the intentions of the author, which leads structuralist to a similar conclusion concerning meaning e.g. that meaning is indeterminate.[5] In one way or another, these philosophers attacked prevailing ideas of meaning that included some reference to structures (loosely understood). The analytic tradition, generally, attacked a representational view of language, where words garner meaning from what they represent or from a knowable word/ world relation.[6] Continental philosophers attacked the structuralists’ view of language where words derive meaning from their relation to other words. Without a representationalists’ or structuralists’ view of language, meaning becomes indeterminate. The words, once signifiers of the world, are in themselves devoid of meaning. They become shadows, floating free, un-

hinged from the world and the intentions of language users. After radical translation and radical deconstruction, all we have left is the textual residue of symbols.[7]

In *Experience and Nature*, philosopher John Dewey, states “Meaning is not a psychic existence, it is primarily a property of behavior.” Quine used Dewey’s work to explicate his ideas on the indeterminacy of translation. In an article in the *Journal of Philosophy*, Quine explains the influence Dewey’s “*Art as Experience*” had on him. Dewey commented that “meaning... is a property of behavior,” not words. Wittgenstein would later adopt a similar view of meaning, but he referred to it as ‘forms of life’ instead of behavior. In “*Ontological Relativity*,” Quine goes on to state, “uncritical semantics is the myth of a museum in which the exhibits are meanings and the words are labels.” He goes on to argue that in following Dewey, “what we give up is not just the museum figure of speech [representationalism or word/ world relations]. We give up an assurance of determinacy.”

One of the key tenants in empiricism, according to Sellars, is that direct experience provides meaning—to experience an object is to know an object. In “*Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*,” Sellars argues that this view reifies the “myth of the given.” In other words, knowledge does not depend on direct experience, but instead relies on a vocabulary, beliefs, etc. that are distinct from direct experience. The important point of Sellars “myth of the given” for our purposes here is that he defers meaning from immediate experience to conceptual knowledge through language. As we will see, Derrida does something similar with language itself.

Structuralism of the 1950s and 1960s owed a debt to Ferdinand Saussure, a linguist in the early twentieth century. Saussure, similar to the Pragmatists and Wittgenstein, argued that words do not derive meaning from a word/ world relationship, but instead rely on a relationship between words. According to Saussure, meaning is derived from what the word is not or the difference between the word and other words. This indicates that meaning is beyond the immediate use of language and awaits discovery in the overall structure of relationships between words—hence structuralism.

In *Death of the Author* (1968), Roland Barthes, once a staunch structuralist broke from structuralism. For Barthes, the intentions of the author of a text cannot account for the text's meaning. The meaning of a text is removed from the author, because things like 'intentions' are philosophically ambiguous and inaccessible from the text alone. Barthes writing negotiates the text as an independent entity, whose meaning cannot be fixed by structures—with culture or any other kind of structures. But for Barthes, the death of the author is the birth of the reader, meaning that interpretations remain open and cannot be fixed by intentions, contexts, structures or any other system. The text is therefore indeterminate.

Jacques Derrida's "differance" provides an example of the post-structuralist view of meaning. Derrida, here, plays with the definitions of words to explicate his point, which in itself expresses what he conveys. The term "differance" is derived from two meaning connected with the French verb *differer*, which come from the Latin word *differre*. *Differre* means both "putting off until later" and difference "to be not identical, to be other." Accepting the structuralist argument from Saussure, differance indicates for Derrida, indicates that meaning is derived from differences between words, but mean-

ing is never present. According to Derrida, meaning is temporally deferred, but never present with the utterance or text.[8]

The shadow words are the inevitable outcome of twentieth century philosophers' analysis of meaning. Removed from the structures of philosophy, meaning is set adrift. If meaning is removed from the text, whether by its relation to 'forms of life,' culture, linguistic structures, or difference, then text become open repositories of interpretation. Asemic writing takes this idea at its extreme and shows us what language becomes once we give up on the idea that meaning is, or could, be static, universal, and/ or absolute.. Once freed from absolutes, recognition of textual plasticity is the first step in recognizing our own indeterminacy—and potential.

[1] Kanon, Sample, "On Asemic Writing - Asymptote," interview with Michael Jacobson, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/visual/michael-jacobson-on-asemic-writing/>.. NOTE: the Indeterminacy of Meaning is a reference to W. V. Quine's indeterminacy of translation. *Sens*, French very for meaning. (Non) *sens* reads—without meaning. Asemic, by definition means non-semantic or without meaning. The meaning of asemic texts are derived from various open interpretations and therefore are not arbitrary 'gibberish.'

[2] Ibid.

[3] Quine, W. V. 1960. *Word and object*. [Cambridge]: Technology Press of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Please see Chapter II "Translation and Meaning." I borrowed the phrase "indeterminacy of translation" from Quine's *Word and Object*.

[4] For more information on the Analytic/ Continental divide in philosophy, please see: C. G. Prado, *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy* (Humanity Books, 2003), 10. "The heart of the analytic/Continental opposition is most evident in methodology, that is, in a focus on analysis or on synthesis. Analytic philosophers typically try to solve fairly delineated philosophical problems by reducing them to their parts and to the relations in which these parts stand. Continental philosophers typically address large questions in a synthetic or integrative way, and consider particular issues to be 'parts of the larger unities' and as properly understood and dealt with only when fitted into those unities." Prado. See also: Kile Jones, "Analytic versus Continental Philosophy," *Philosophy Now: a Magazine of Ideas*, October 2009, https://philosophynow.org/issues/74/Analytic_versus_Continental_Philosophy. The main difference between Analytic and Continental philosophy stems from the use of different canons. According to C.G. Brado, in *A House Divided*, analytic philosophers think small, while Continental philosophers think big, in terms of method and subject matter.

[6] Wittgenstein's early work represented a representationalist view, although he disagreed with Bertrand Russel that a correspondence between word and world was discernable. His later work—*Philosophical Investigations*—took a non-representationalist view of language. He came to view language as a behavior, similar to the works of American Pragmatists, such as John Dewey and William James.

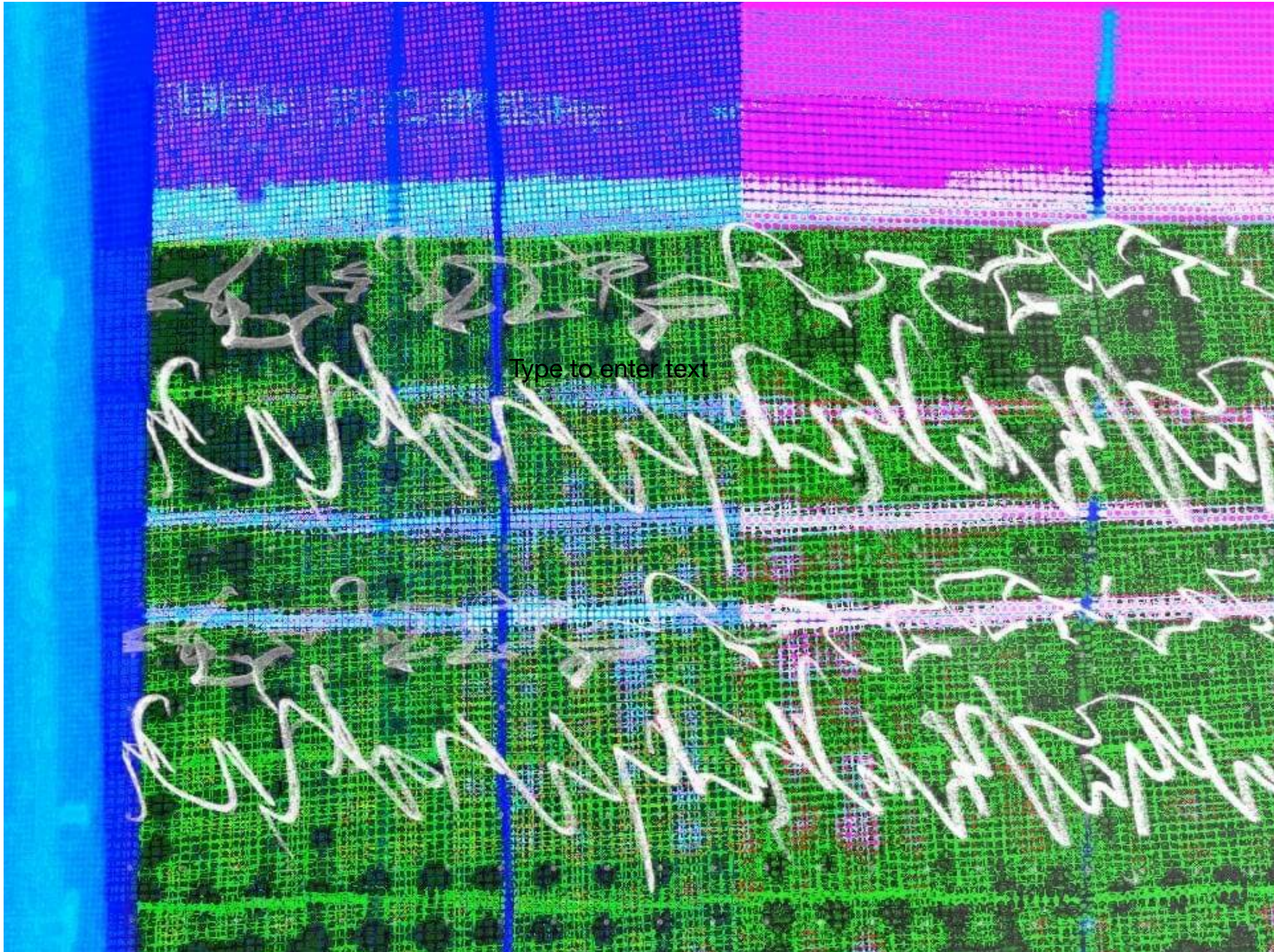
[7] Philosophers did not argue that meaning was completely lost and 'subjectivity' reigned supreme. We simply had to rethink our idea of meaning and incorporate non-linguistic behavior, etc. If we believe in a representationalist or structuralist's view of language, twentieth

century philosophy would be seen as destroying meaning, leading to an unparalleled subjectivity or solipsism. Radical deconstruction, here, refers to the loss of real, or loss of the word/ world relationship.

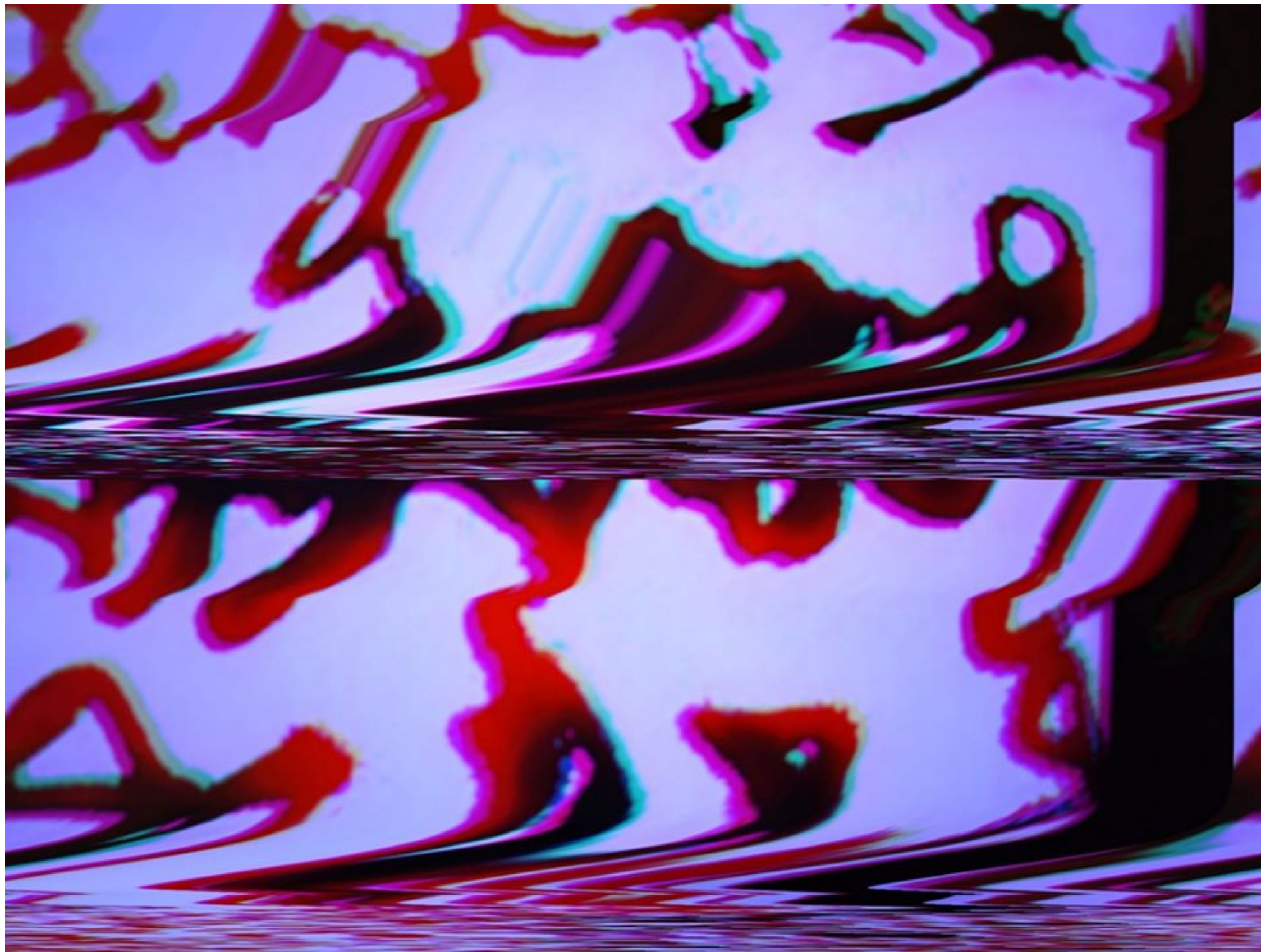
[8] Richard L. W. Clarke LITS3304 Notes 09



Glitch are reconstructs, or deconstructs, digital information to create both new works and abstracted representations of familiar visual phenomena. Both glitch art and asemic art play on 'information' to create aesthetic experiences.



1.10.1B GLITCH ASEMIC

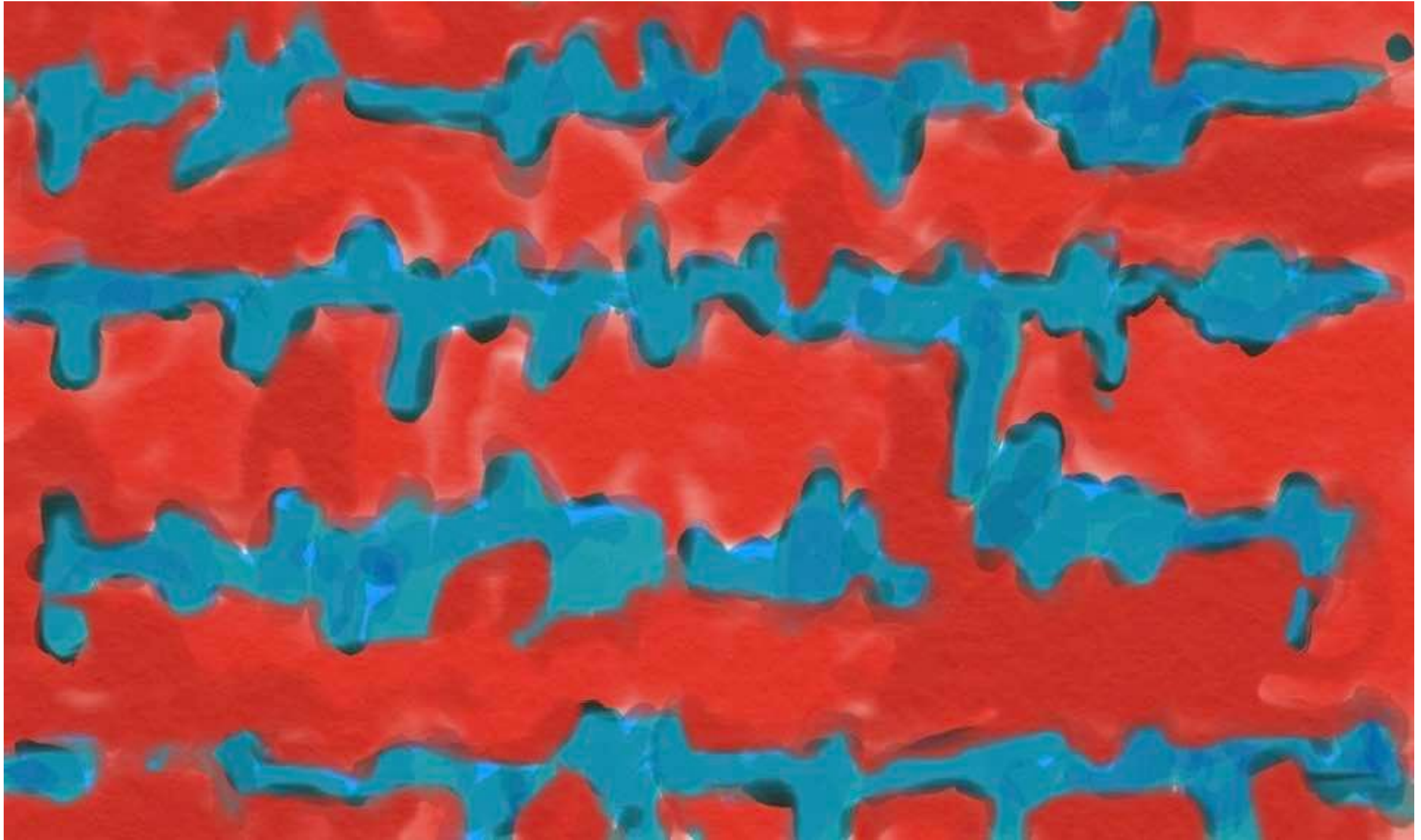


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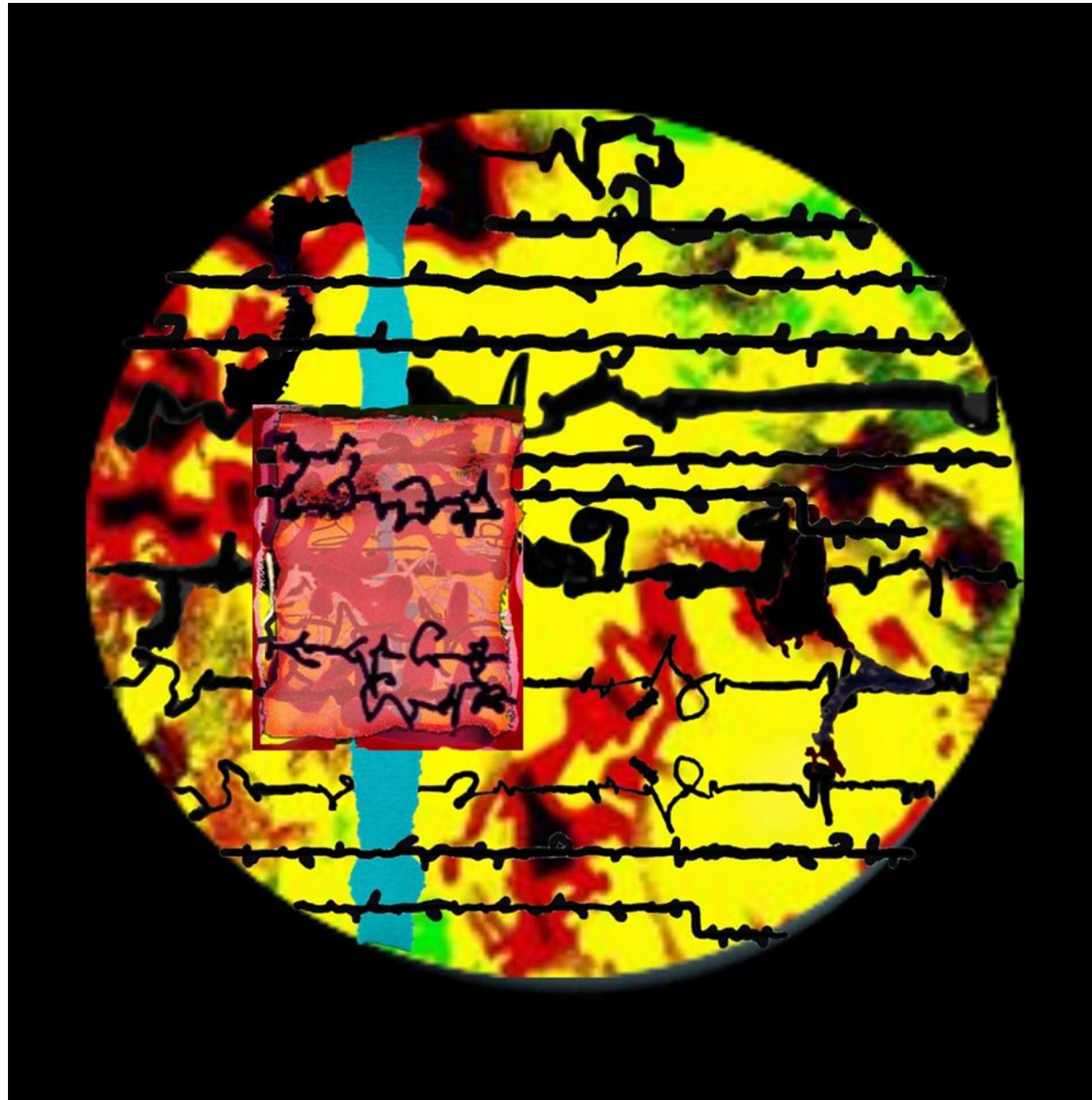


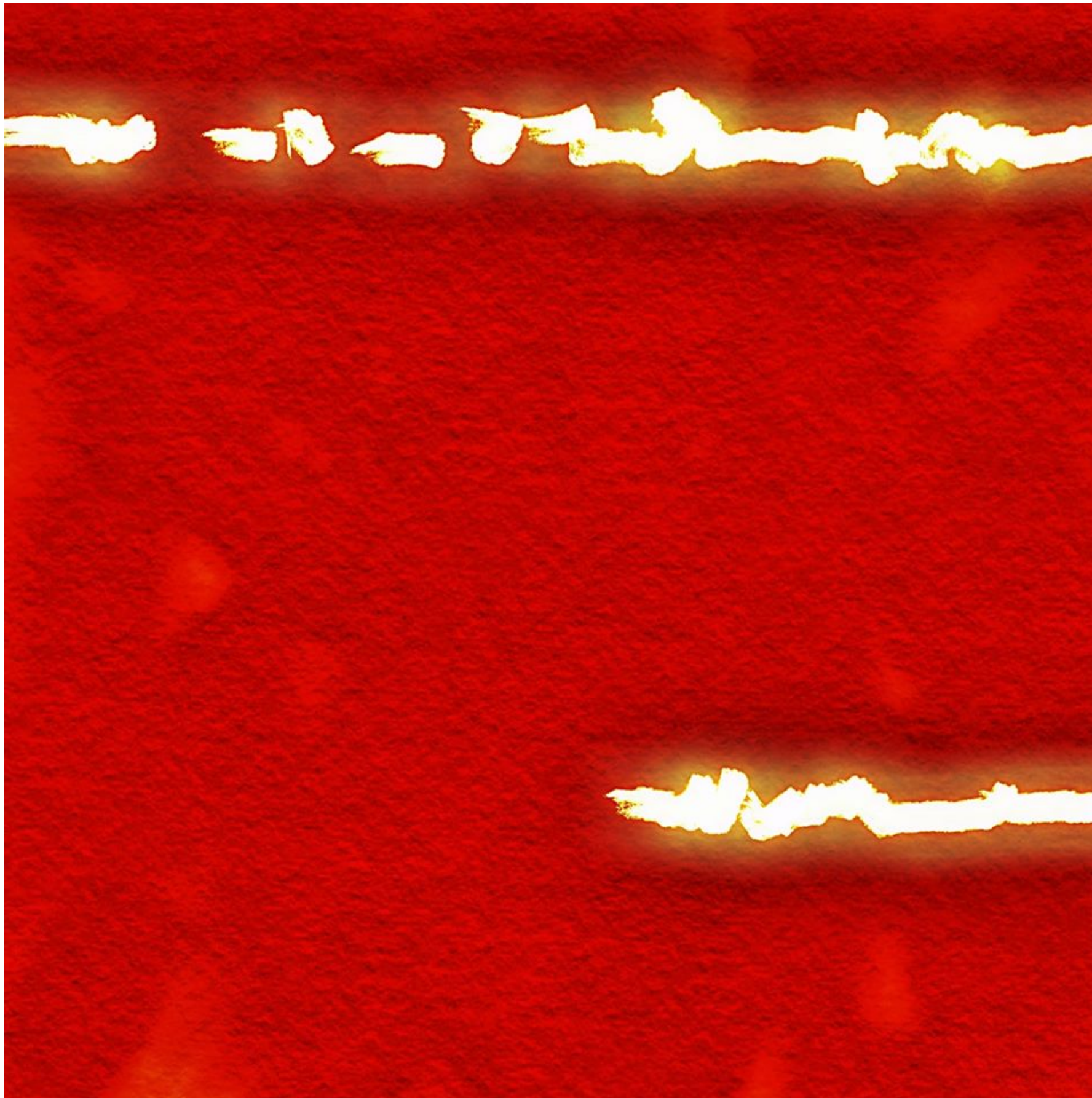


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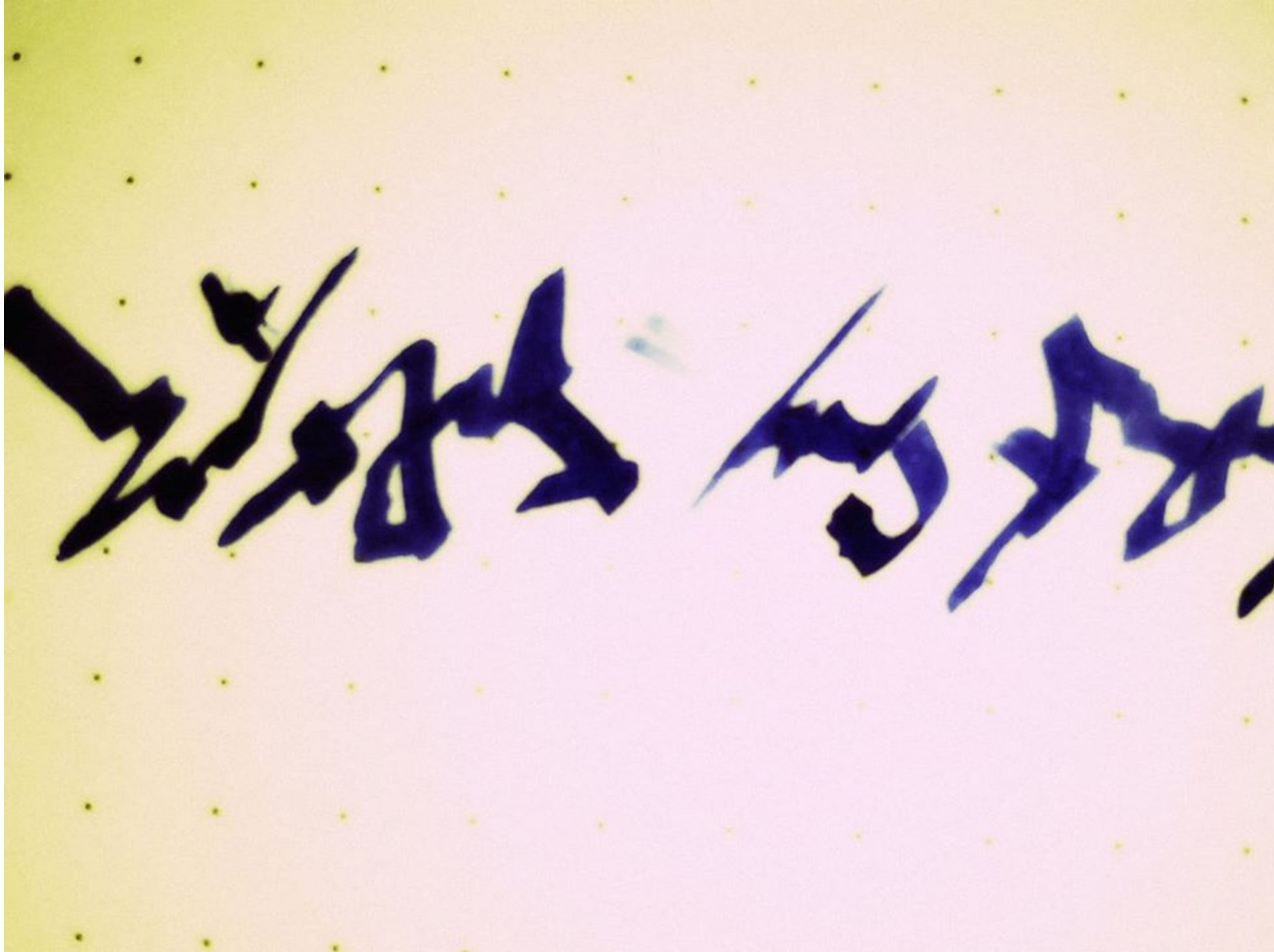


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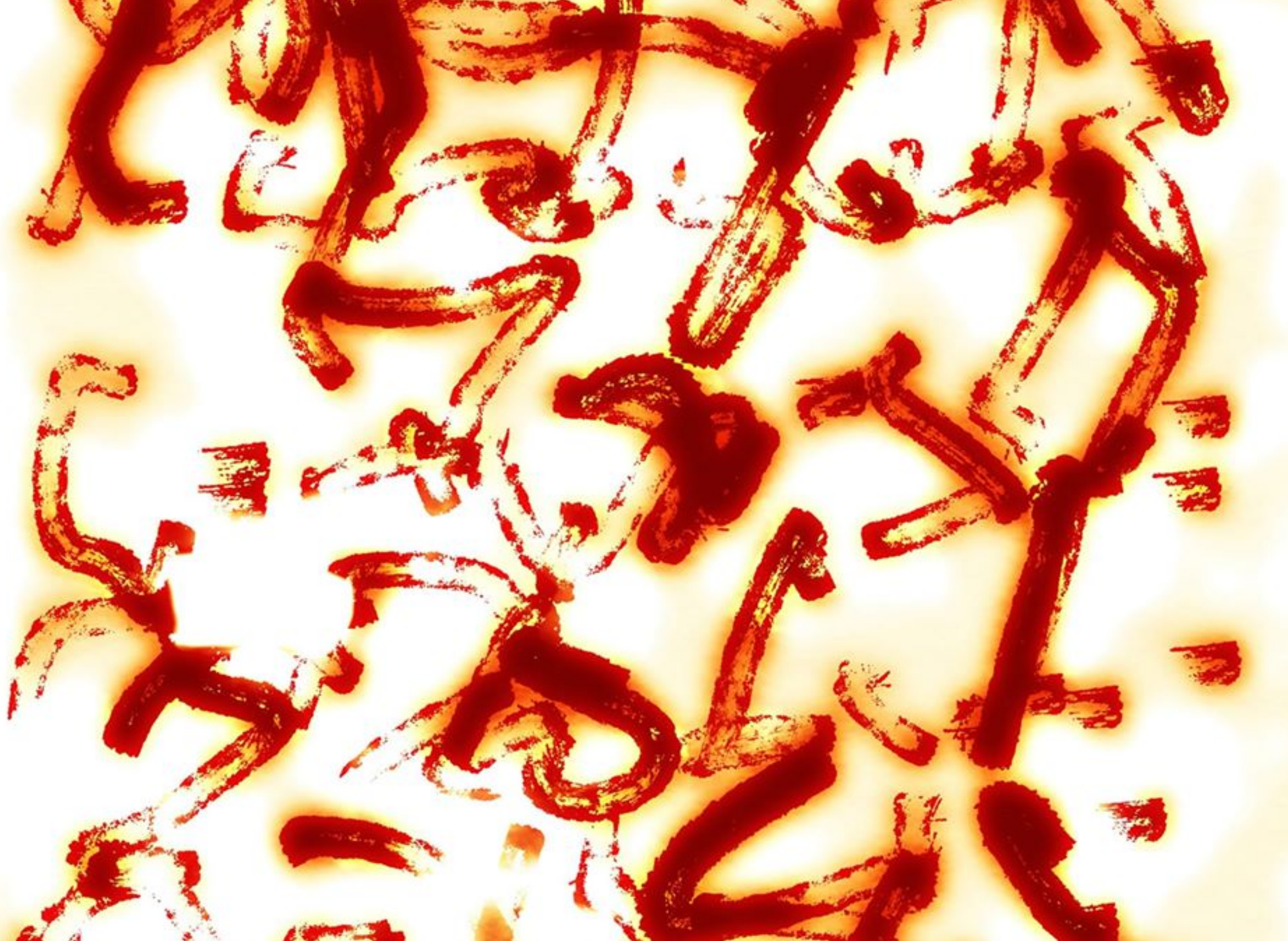
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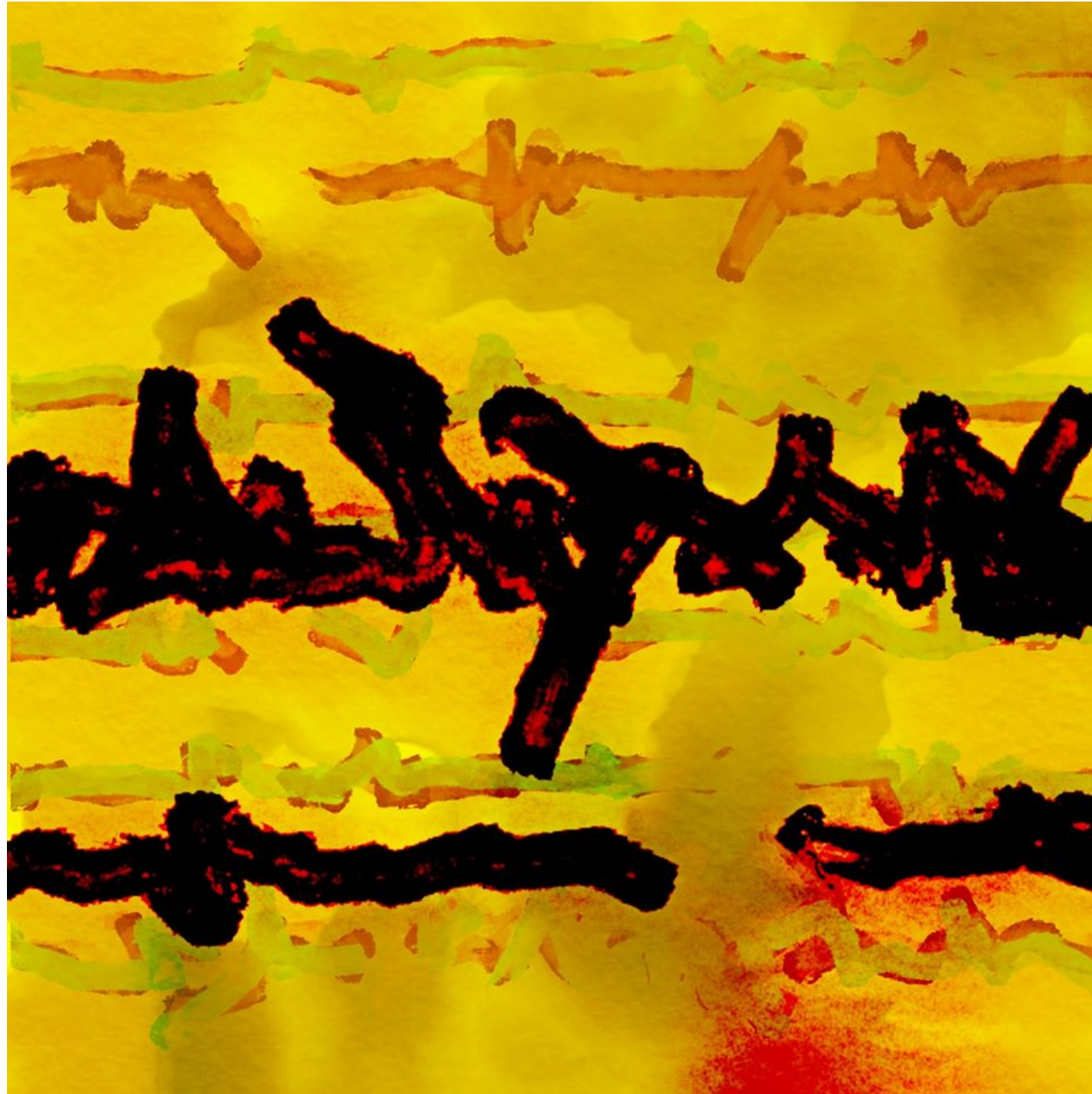


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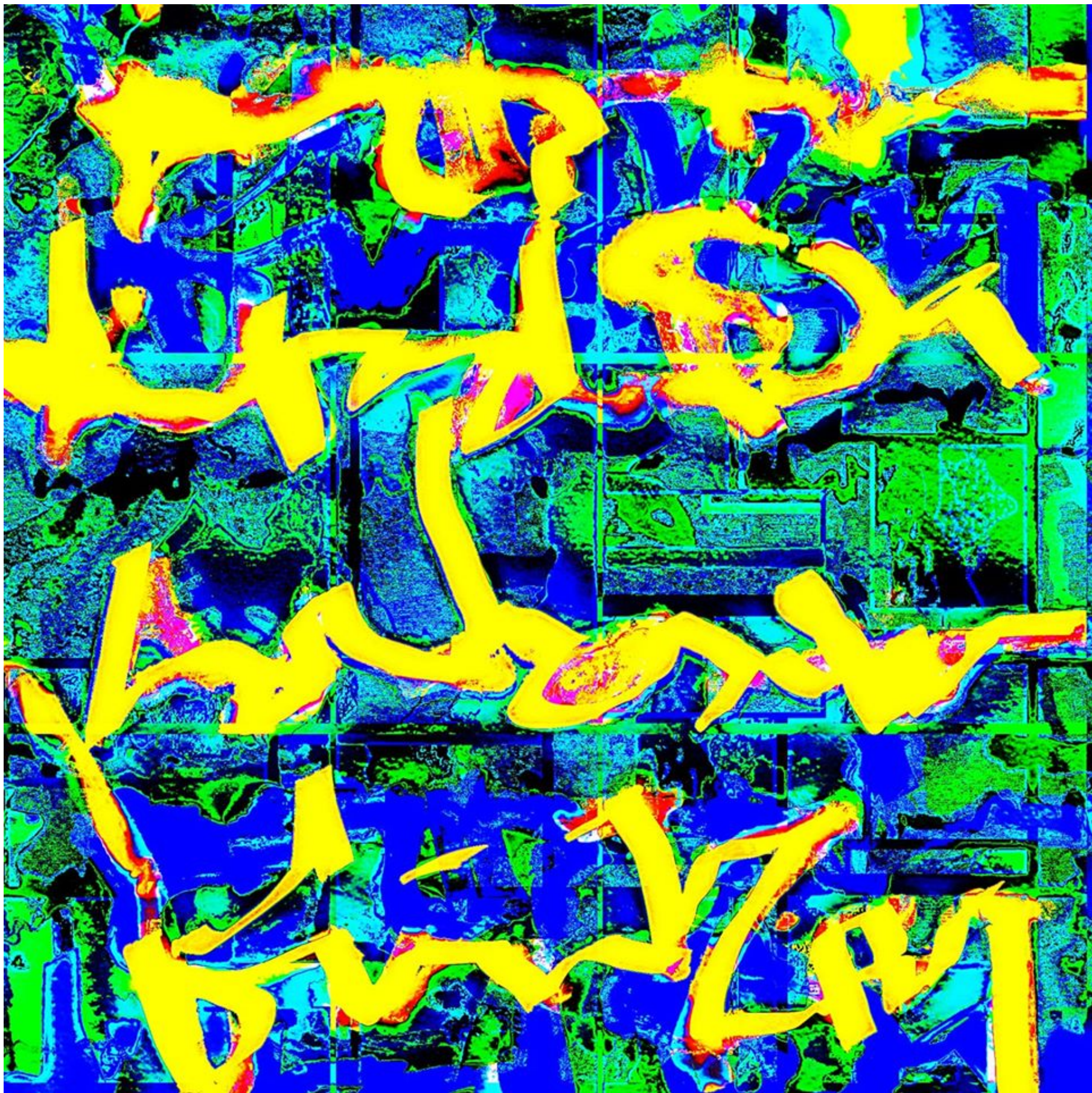
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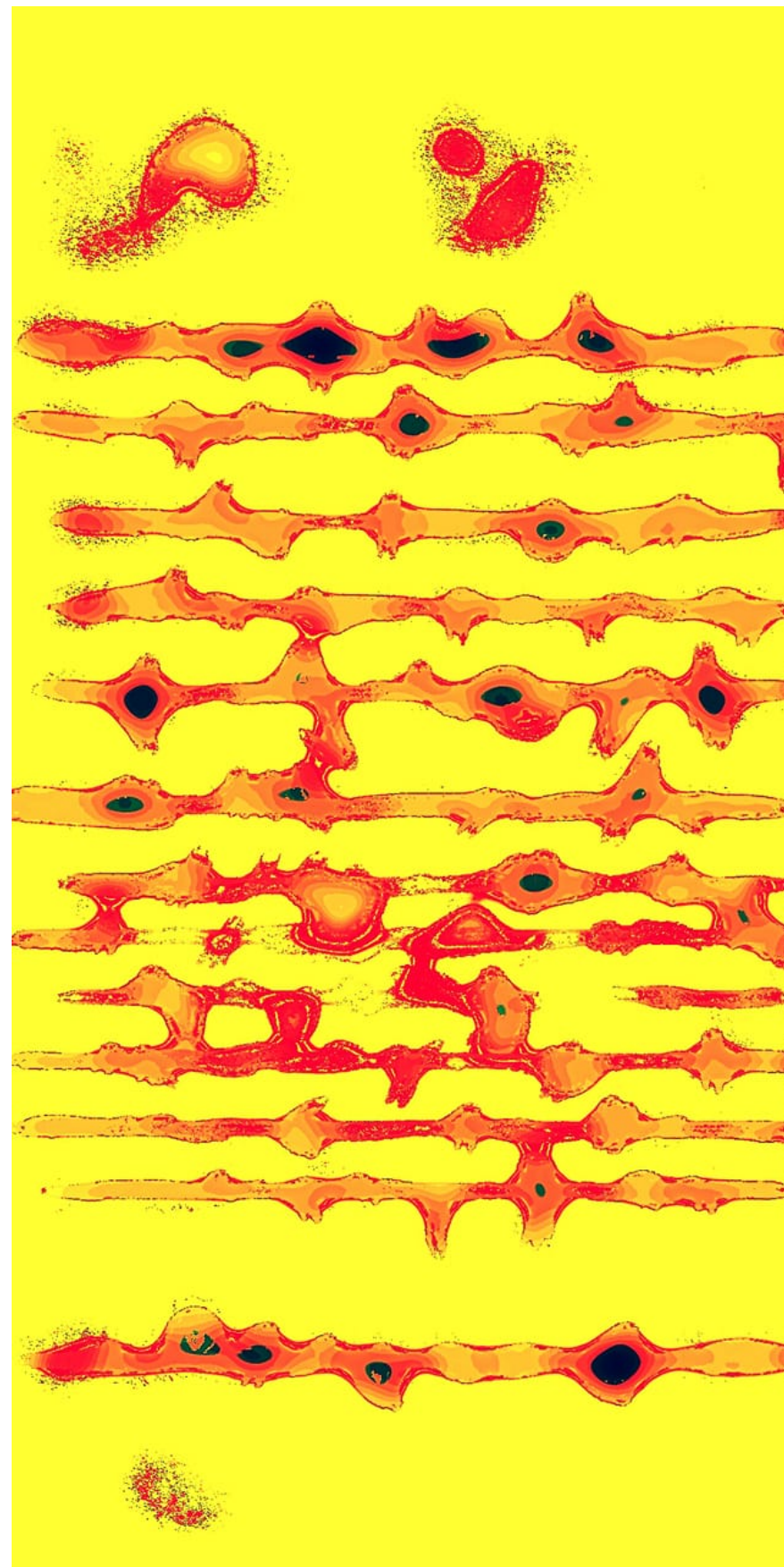


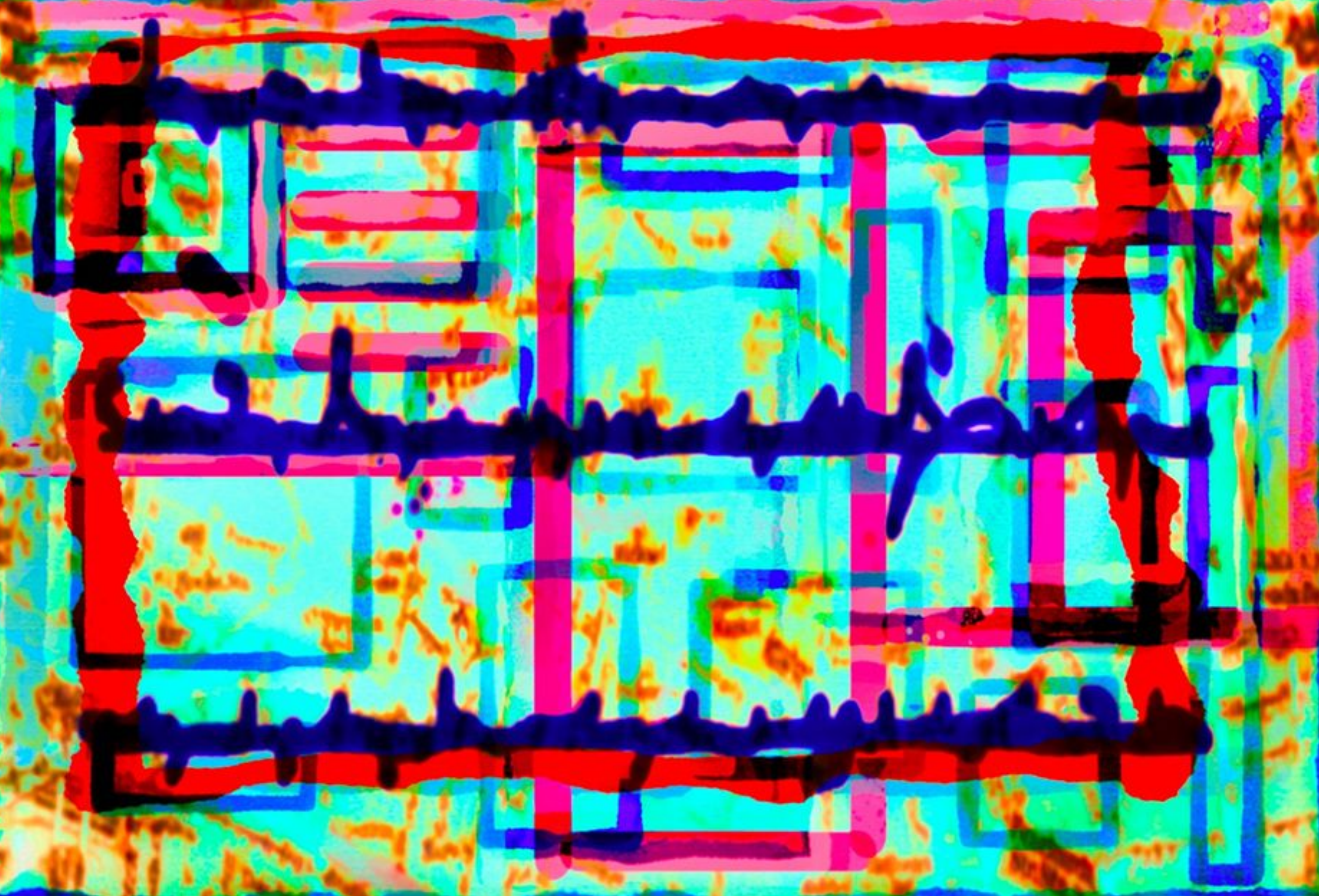
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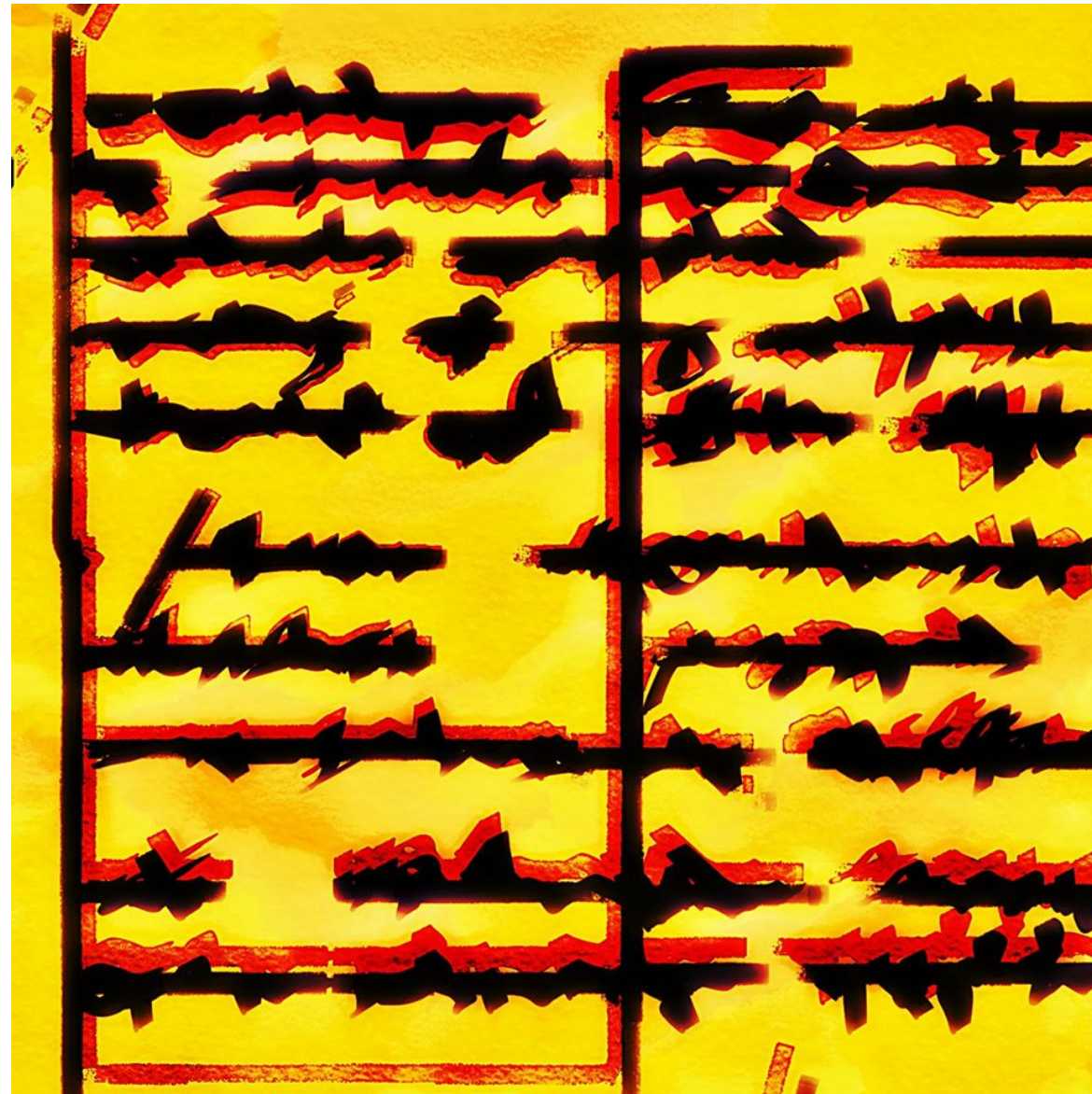








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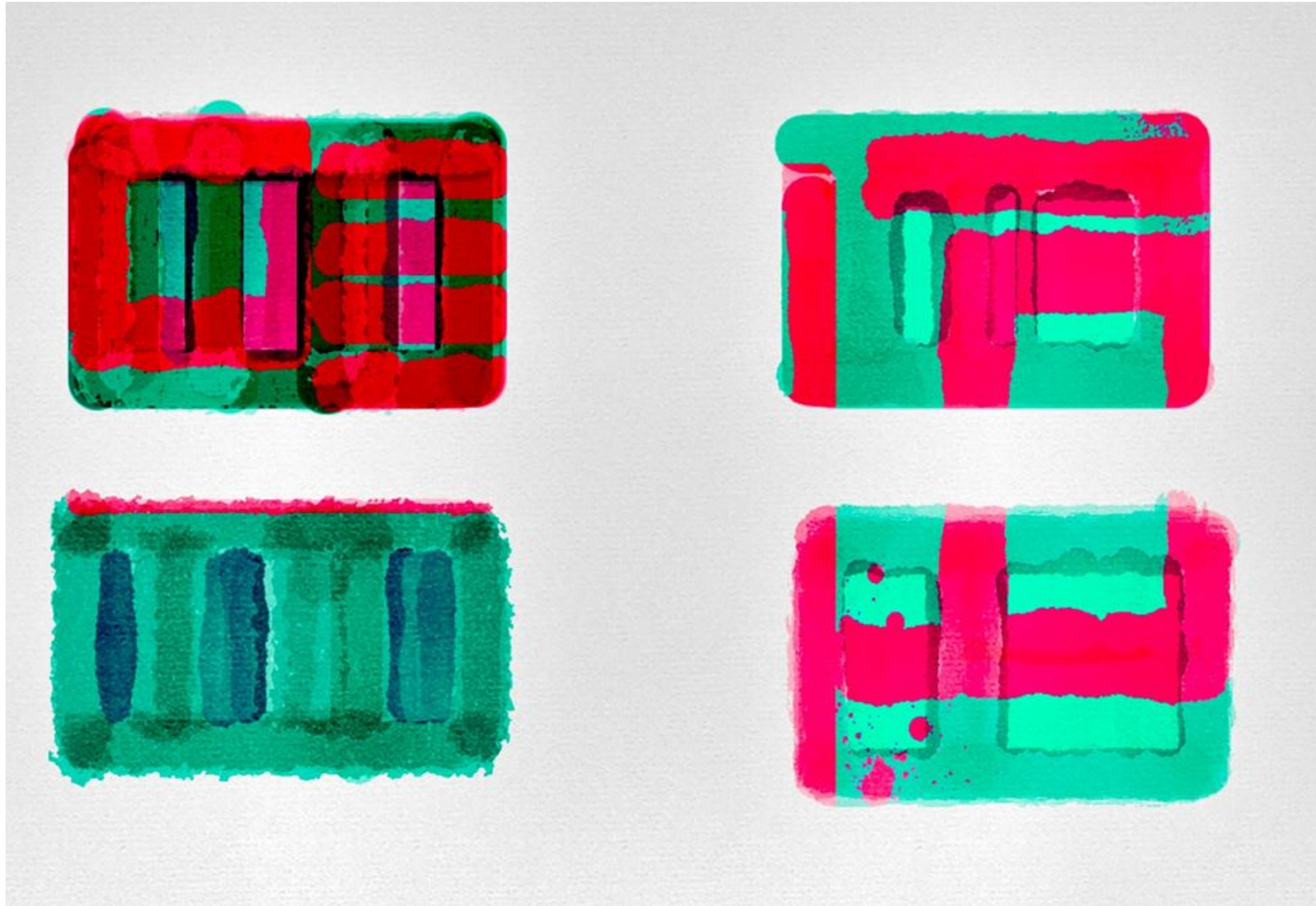




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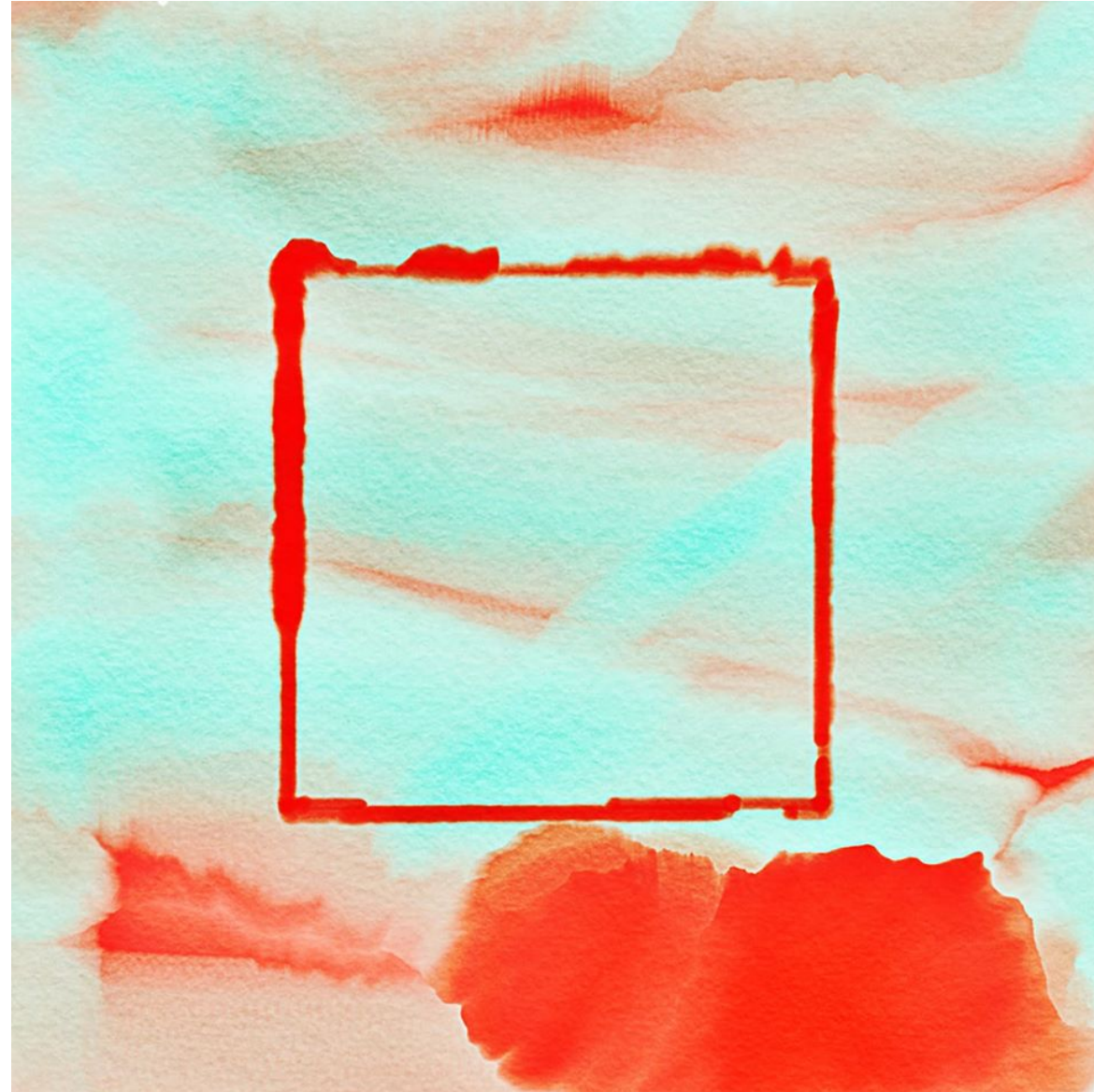
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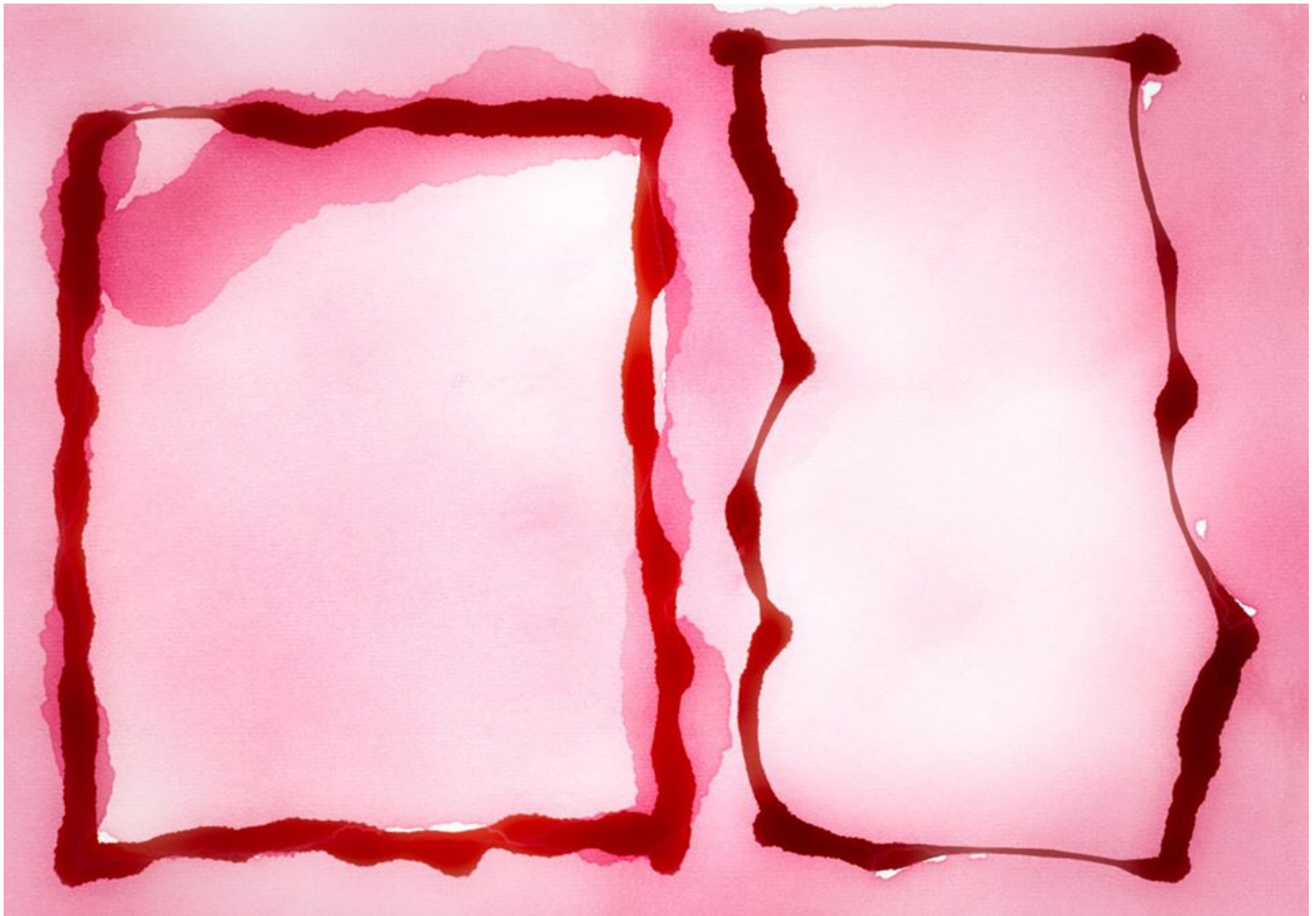
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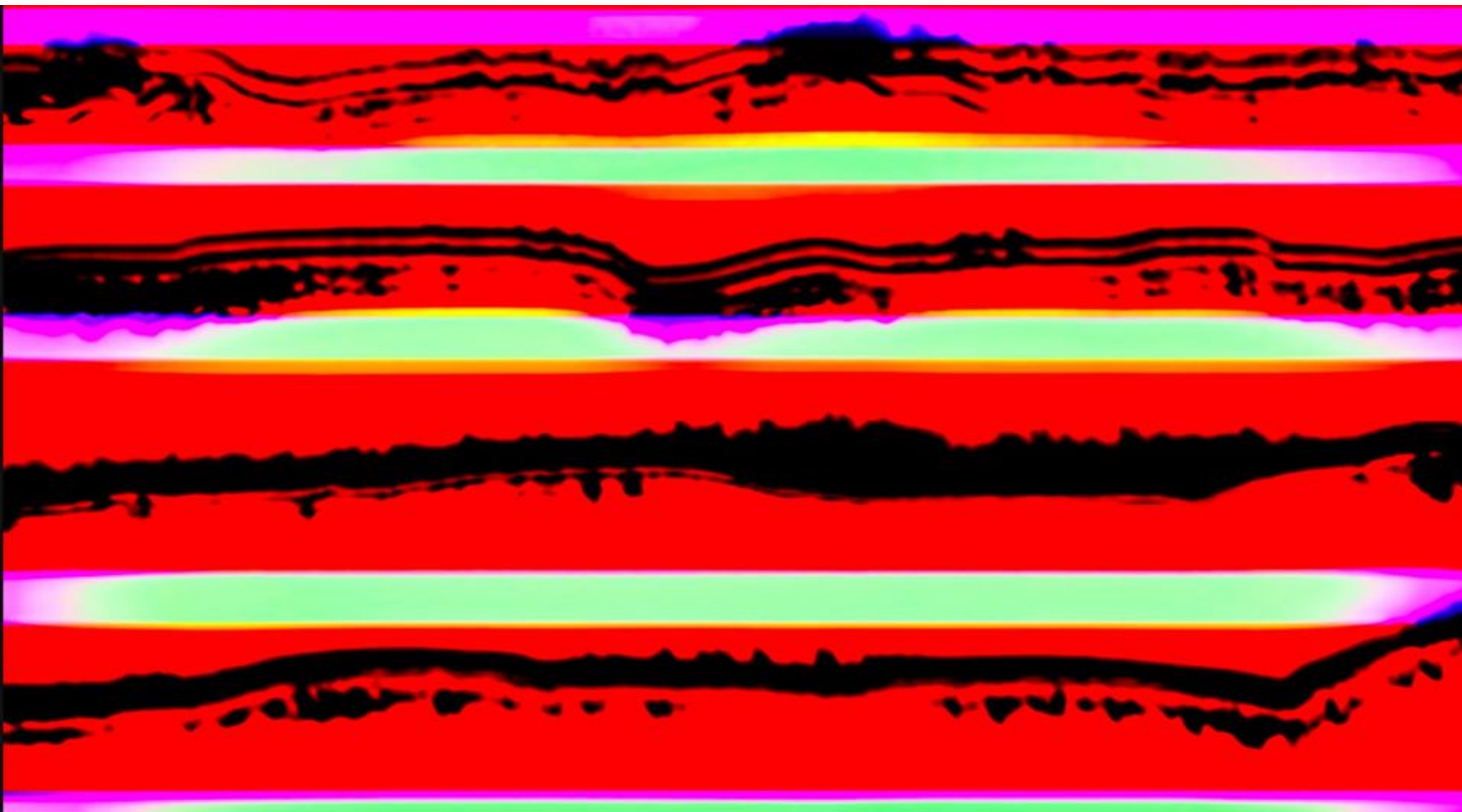


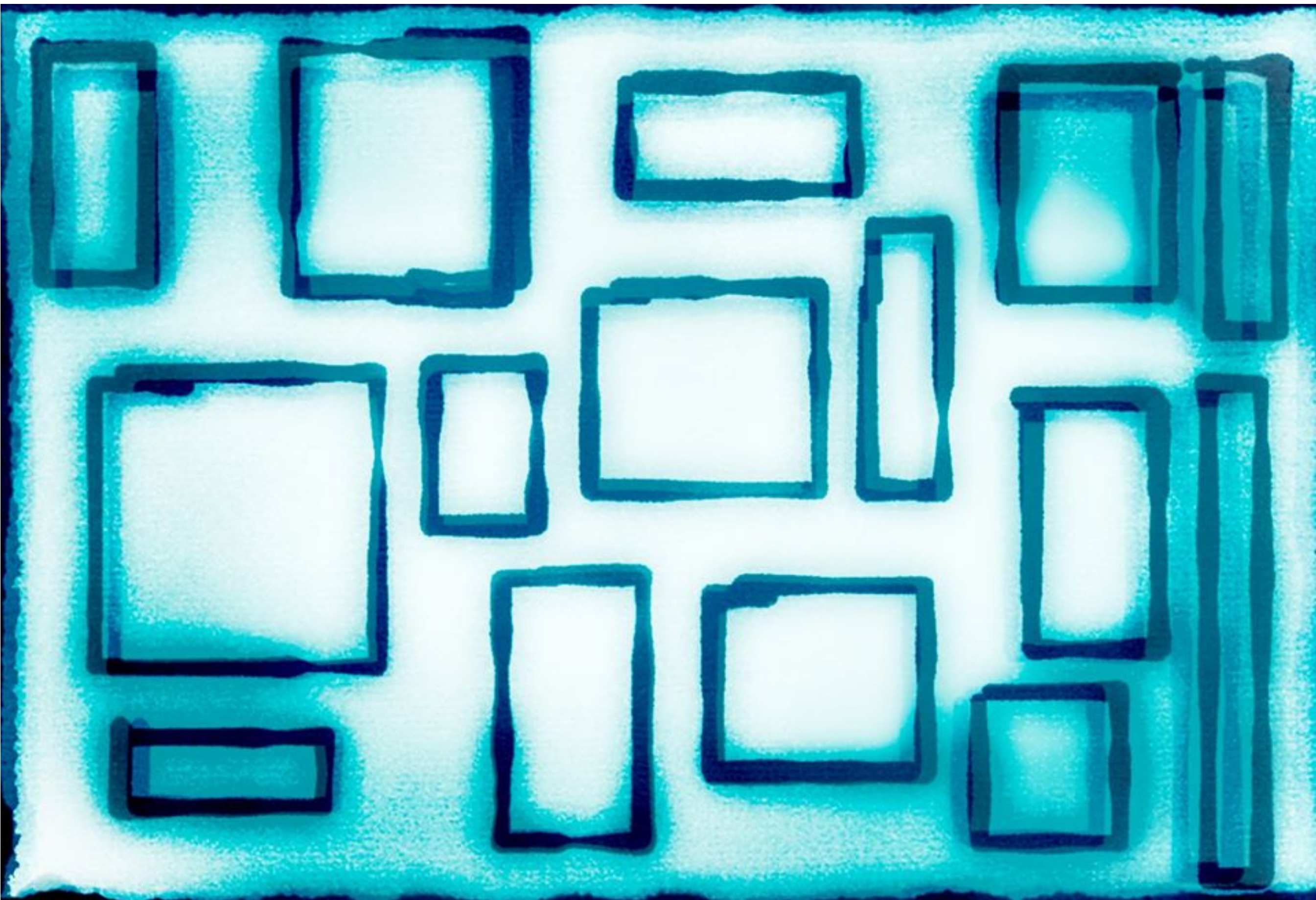




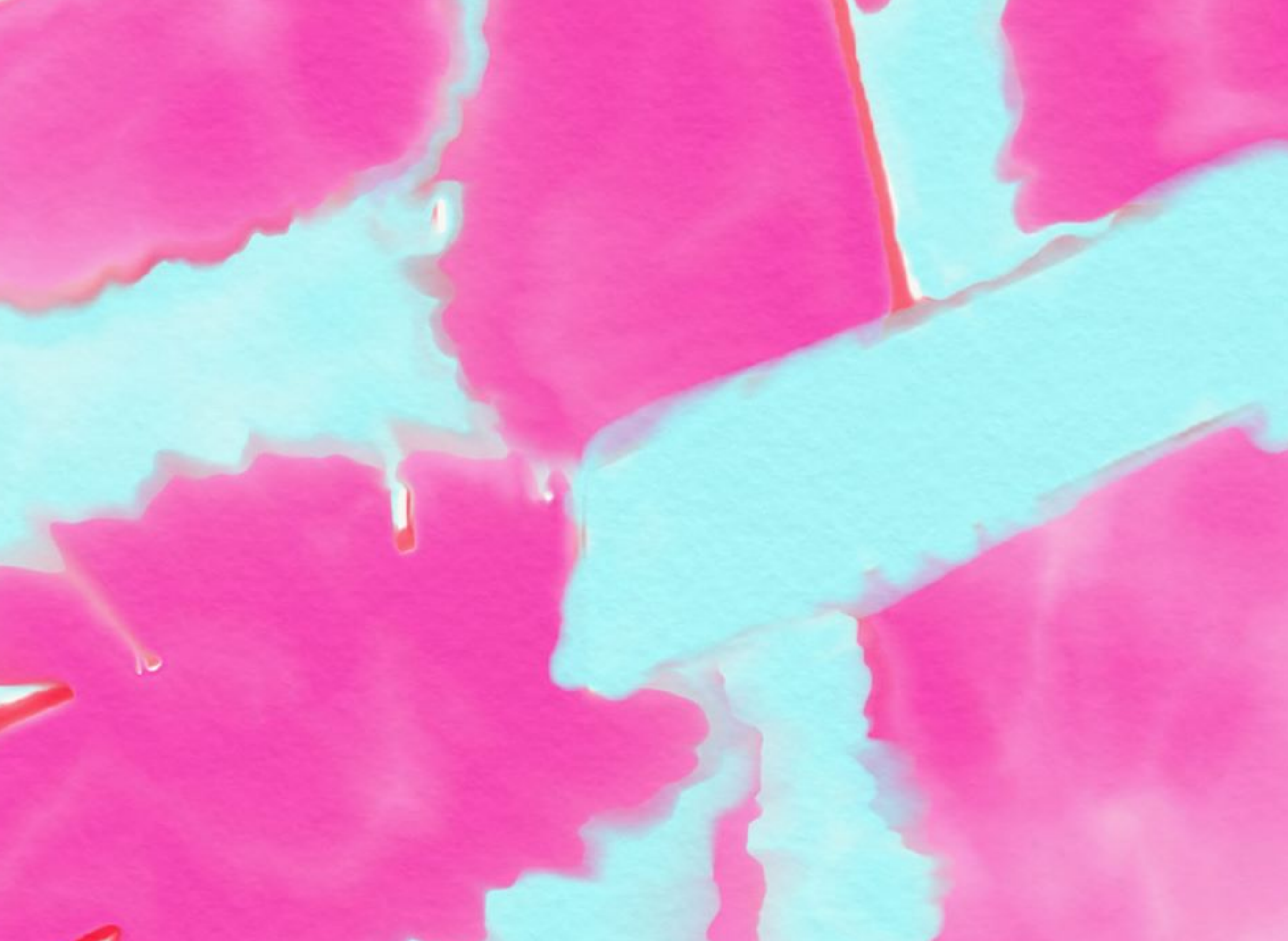




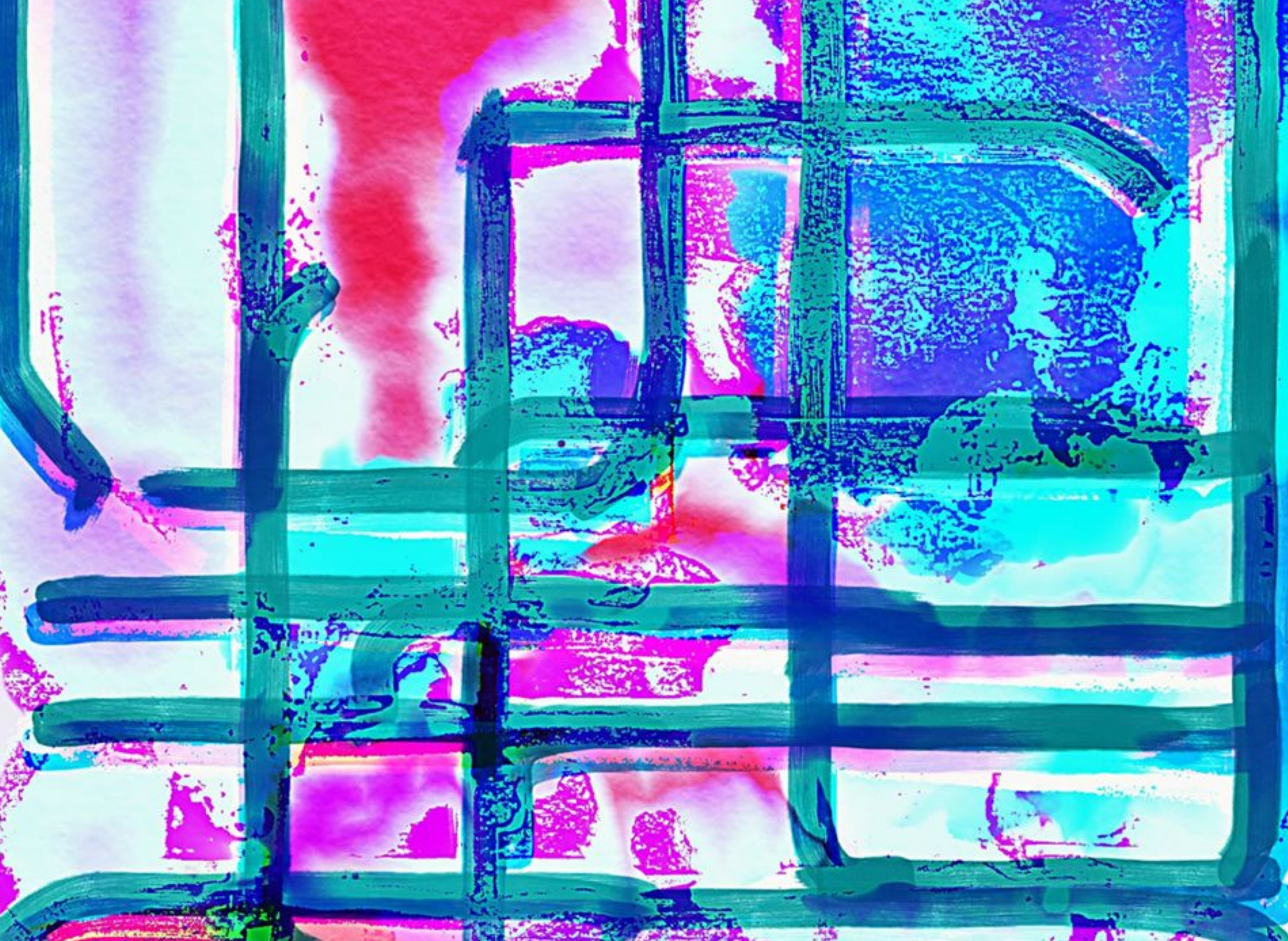


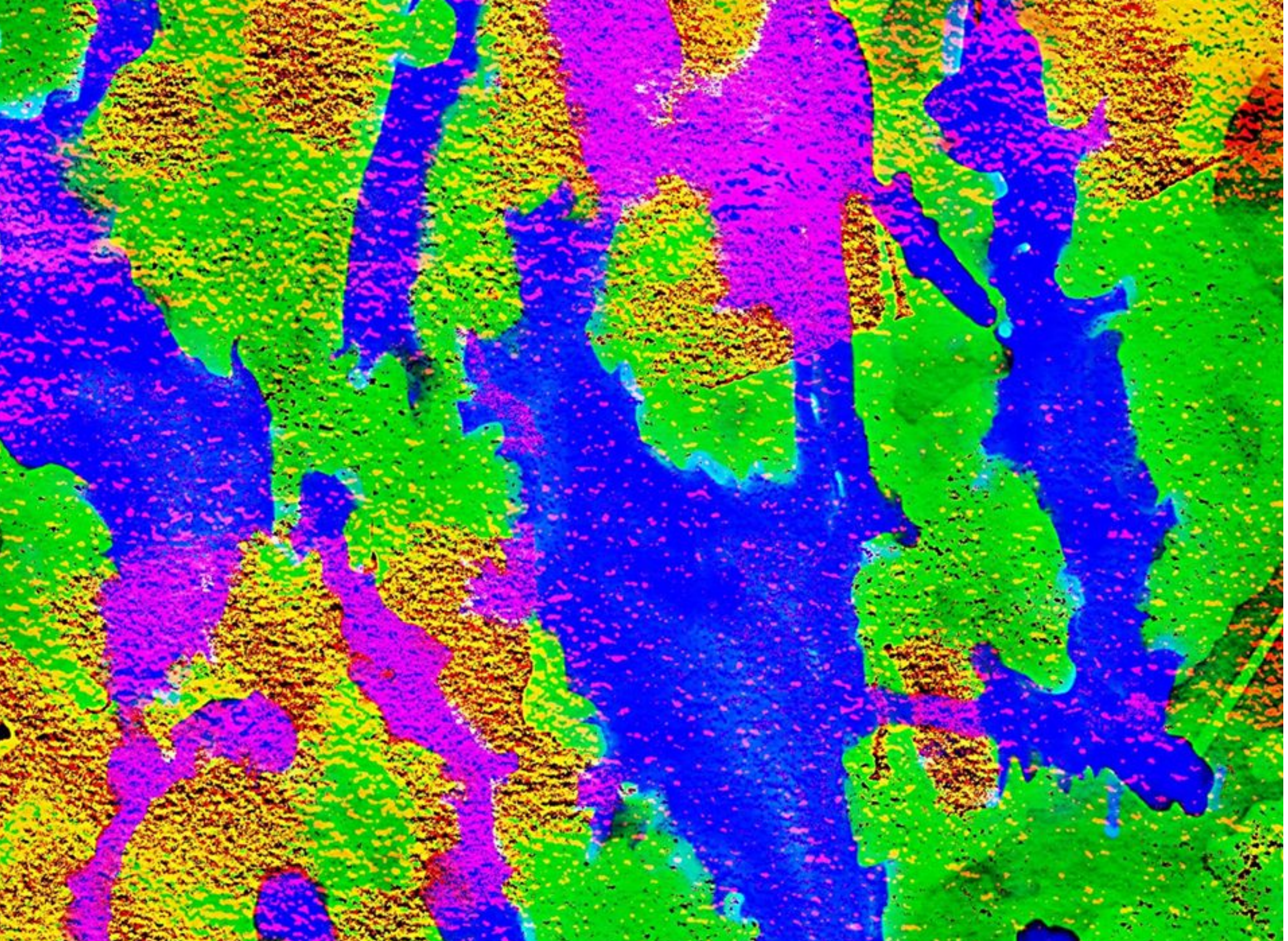






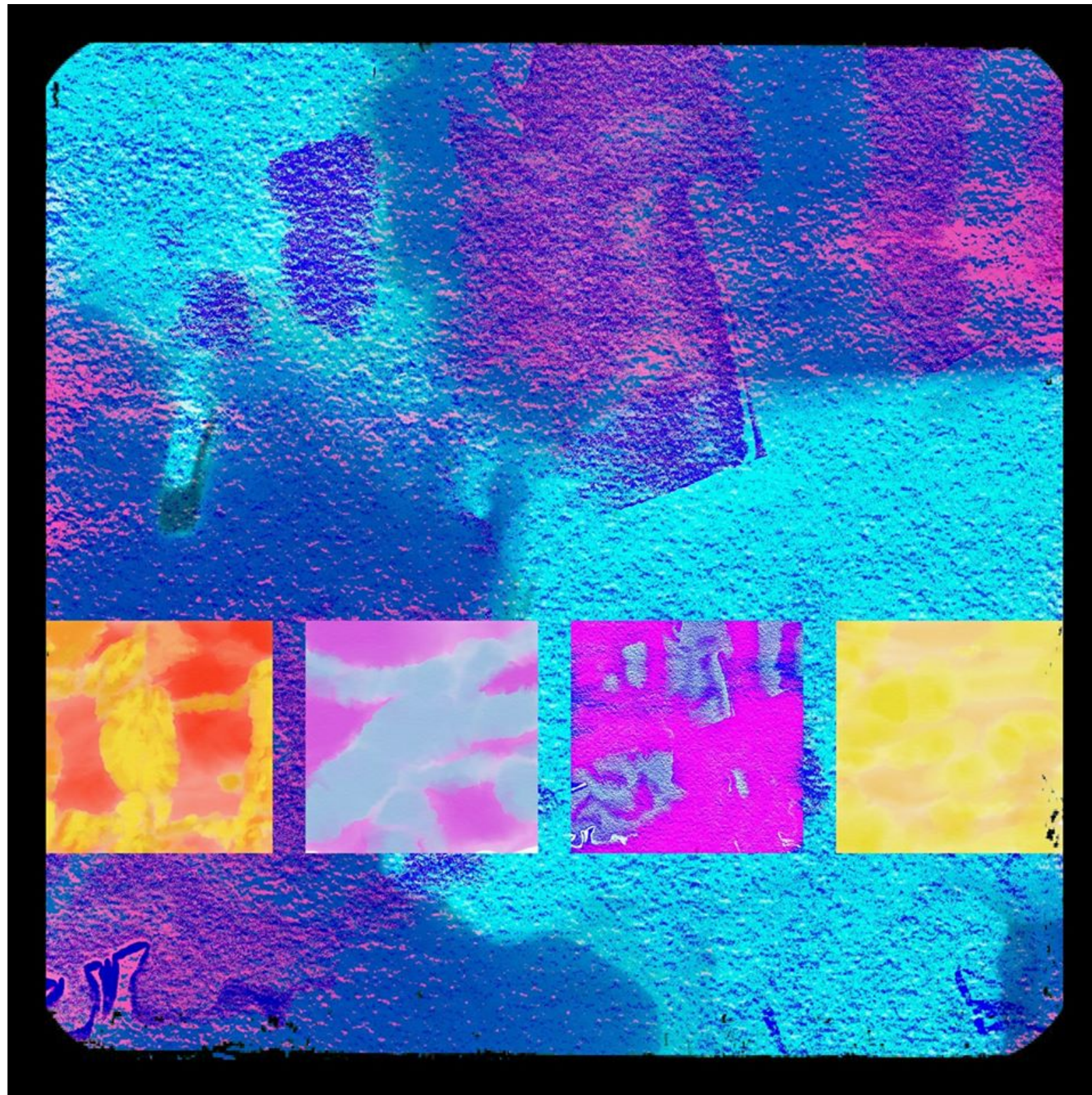


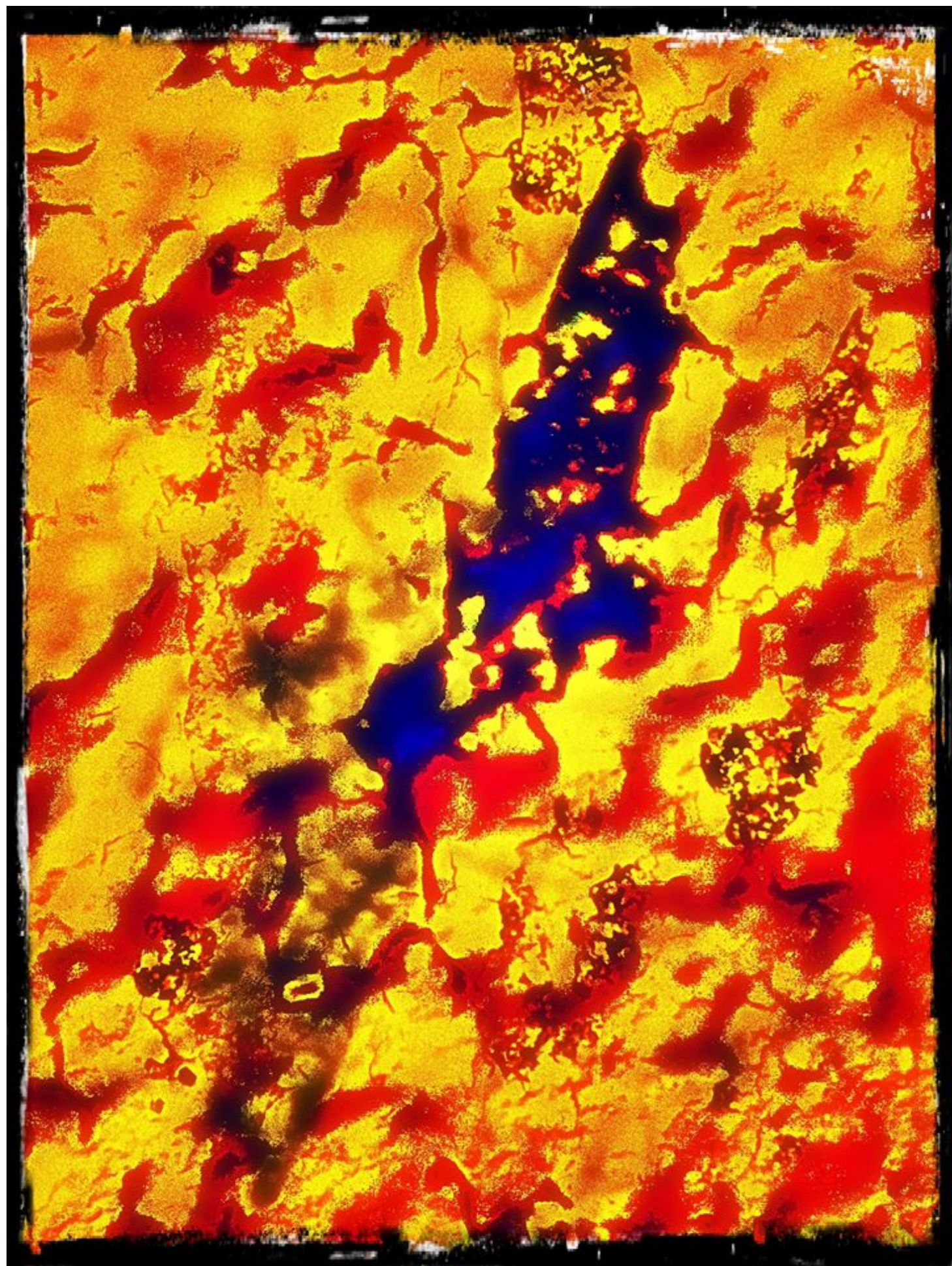




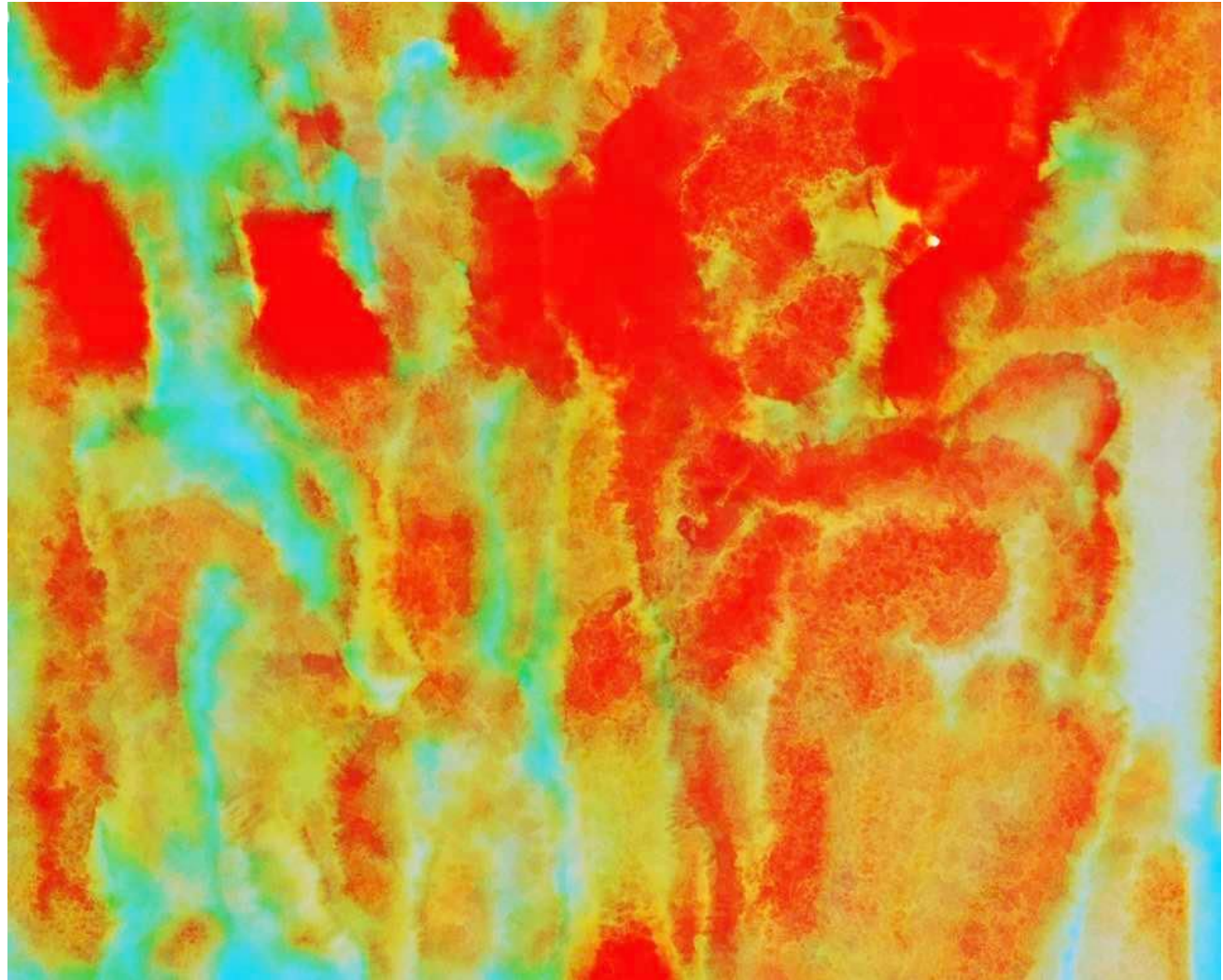








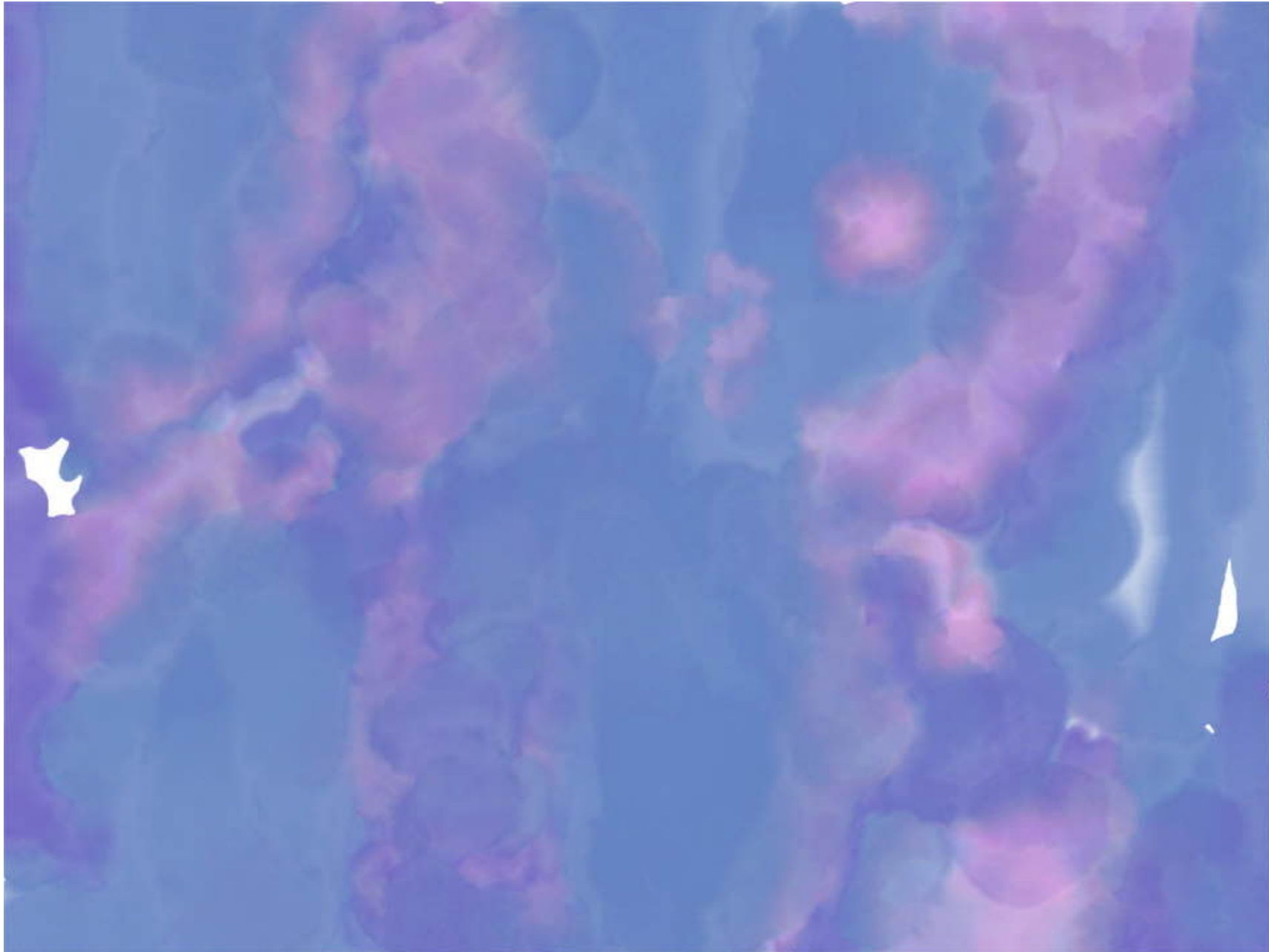












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